
**Book review: *The History of the Hebrew university of
Jerusalem, origins and beginnings***

The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1977, 722 p.

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The universities have become, during the last decades, a major factor in Israeli life and education. However, their growth was spontaneous and was not followed by reflection on the theoretical and practical features of the idea of a university and its role in Israeli life.

The present volume researches the origins and beginnings of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; one of the major projects of the Zionist movement. The relations between the theoretical and applied aspects of the university are encountered with the aspirations and needs of the national movement.

The volume is not a comprehensive history of the Hebrew University but a collection of articles according to a master plan. The magnitude of source material and the availability of authors determined to a certain extent the nature of the collection.

The chapters describe the various factors, which combined together in forming the idea of the university. There was the need of Jewish students who were deprived of higher education in Russia, the wish to attribute the distinction of Jews in the science to the Jewish people, the desire to develop a modern science of Judaism and to mobilize science in the service of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel.

The far-reaching scope of the project is manifested by chapters which deal with the Jewish students against the development of universities in Russia and the Jewish religious seminaries which adopted academic disciplines – and many serve as preludes and parallels to the university which always dissociated itself from any religious affiliation.

The narrative history of the first stages before and after the First World War is complemented in this volume by the programmatic speeches at the opening ceremony of the university in 1925. The speeches are accompanied by commentaries.

The wide background of the history includes some chapters on the physical site of the university and the architectural plans which expressed the various visions on the nature of the university; the oriental style was followed by a more international style.

various chapters are devoted to personalities who shaped the university in its formative years (like J.L. Magnes and A. Einstein) and to department which laid the foundation of the institute.

The problem of Judaic studies and their relation to the tradition on the one hand, and to scientific methods, on the other, is discussed in several chapters. The general humanities are represented in a chapter on the establishment of the Department of General History and Islamic Studies.

There are chapters on mathematics and physics but the natural sciences are not discussed adequately.

The historical description demonstrates how planning and accident, the blueprint and availability of candidates and means played a role in the establishment of the university.

The volume includes a section which may be named counterfactual history – failed beginning, i.e.; projects which did not materialize due to various reasons, objective and subjective.

Although the book deals with the roots and beginnings, it touches upon topics that became crucial in the later stages – the relation between research and teaching and the relation between the university and the growing Jewish society in Eretz Israel.

The plight of the Jewish intelligentsia in Eastern Europe is now, of course, a solely historical issue. But the relation between excellence and mass education; pure and applied science as well as the order of priorities in the establishment of faculties is still with us. The nature of the university as an all-Jewish institution is matched by its duty to respond to the needs of the State of Israel. These aspects have their bearing on the public investment in the university. The availability of jobs for the prospective graduates was discussed from the very beginning and is still a problem.

Another aspect which was considered by the initiators and founders of the university is the role of a Hebrew university in the Middle East and in face of the Arab population. The university was and is open to the members of all the religions. The scientific adventure and the application of science for the general welfare of the area were conceived from the early plans as a possible field of Jewish-Arab cooperation.

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